

Right and Wrong as to School Feeding.

There are children at school who are underfed or misfed. This is no new question, and where such children have been found, provision has been made for them by giving them school meals, or helping them in some other way. But now two new questions have arisen. Medical men have shown more clearly than was understood before what are the physical conditions of school children, especially of the ill-nurtured, who form perhaps some two per cent. of the children at school. The other new question has no real relation to this, though it is often coupled with it; people are now asking, some that meals should be provided for school children out of the rates, and some that the children should be maintained out of the rates.

THE THREE QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS.

It is quite clear that here we have three very different questions—one old, two new.

The first is: Granted that some children are in want, how shall we best meet the want by voluntary means?

The second is: Granted that some children are ill brought up at home—are dirty, uncared for, ill-nurtured, ill-fed—how shall we best ensure that the parents and the home shall do their duty by the children? Or failing the possibility in particular instances, what should we do?

The third question is: Granted that some children are in want, and that some are ill brought up, shall we put upon the community, through the rates or taxes, the duty of providing meals for the children or of maintaining them altogether?

Thus one suggestion would lead to those who are in want being assisted—by meals, if need be—voluntarily.

The second suggestion would lead to parents being made to do their duty by their children and to bring them up well.

The third suggestion would lead to the parents not being required to do their duty in feeding and maintaining their children, but to this duty being transferred to the general community—so that the parents had more to spend on themselves and might spend less on their children.

THE FIRST QUESTION.

WHAT IS THE EXTENT OF THE WANT OF MEALS?

Let us take the questions in turn.

As to the first, it has often been shown that even those who—chiefly, of course, from their external appearance—are considered by their teachers to be ill-fed, are in great proportion children who, if they are in want, do not require meals only, and usually require aid of quite other kinds. Such inquiries have been made by competent people—Medical Officers of Health and persons experienced in charitable work—in different places and at different times with similar results.

INQUIRIES MADE BY CHARITABLE PERSONS.

Thus in 1891 inquiries were made in several parts of London. In one of these, which may be taken as typical, the teachers mentioned 44 families, the children from which were thought to require food. It was found that in 9 of these families all the children were sufficiently nourished. In 6 the children required other treatment than to be provided with school dinners. In 29 families not all the children were sufficiently nourished: out of these children, 51 in number, 36 required treatment other than school dinners; so did 2 who were sufficiently nourished; 10 required dinners only; and 3 required no treatment at all.

In the next year, 1892, similar inquiries were made in yet other parts of London, with similar results. Often, for instance, the income of the family was enough: such want as there was could be remedied by better thrift and a little saving, and the influence of a Provident visitor would do more to help than the provision of many meals.

INQUIRIES MADE BY MEDICAL OFFICERS.

The inquiries made by Medical Officers and others in other places tell the same tale.

Inquiry was made by the Medical Officer respecting every child in a large Board School in the poorest part of Bradford. There were found no emaciated or starved children. About 2 per cent. were poorly nourished; 22 per cent. were fairly nourished. The rest were well maintained.

At Blackburn the Medical Officer made inquiry in regard to 540 homes where it was thought that the children might be underfed. He found that this was certainly not so in 364 of the homes; that it was probably so in 97 homes, or, in other words, in the cases of 313 children, or 1·3 per cent. of the children

WELLCOME
LIBRARY

P

7443

MS115



22502624318

attending school. But the investigation as to these 97 homes showed that in 7 there was permanent impoverishment, in 69 there were temporary causes of distress, and in 19 there was parental neglect.

At Glasgow and elsewhere similar inquiries have been made with like results.

These inquiries also throw light on another point. They show that in places where no such inquiries have been made the 2 per cent. or so of the children who, as at Birmingham, Sheffield and elsewhere, receive meals represent all, and probably more than all, for whom *in that way* provision should be made.

CONCLUSIONS.

We have thus information obtained impartially by different people in different places which proves:

- (1) That the children who are 'underfed' form a very small proportion of the children at school.
- (2) That the cause of distress in such cases usually lies in the homes, and is not to be found in the mere want of a dinner at school.
- (3) That for the removal of the cause of distress home treatment, or home *and* school treatment, is necessary.
- (4) That the feeding by itself is, in view of the actual causes, often a mere *negative* policy, leaving the child possibly in a mass of trouble with the mere drop of water of a school meal granted him by way of consolation.

We thus have a voluntary system of providing meals which in most of the large towns has hitherto met whatever need there has been of this kind. If there have not been school feeding funds everywhere, it does not follow that where they have not been established a need has been left unprovided. On the contrary, it is evident that the need may rightly have been met in quite other ways as well, or even more effectively, than by the supply of dinners at school.

People are inclined to say: 'The need is enormous; charitable effort cannot meet it. We must fall back on the rates; they are inexhaustible—they can meet it.'

But all these assertions are amiss. The need is not enormous; charitable effort has so far met it, and if in the future more is required of charity, there is no reason to fear that it will not be forthcoming. We need not, therefore, fall back on the rates. And if we do fall back on the rates, as is now proposed, the rates, treated as 'inexhaustible,' will be a great burthen to us, while *they will not help us to meet the real difficulty.*

The rates will be a great burthen, and no less a wrong kind of burthen. By law, and the usual conditions of society, parents have to maintain their own children. When the parents love pleasure, or when they are suffering from distress in consequence of misfortune, loss of employment, sickness, or some other cause, they are tempted to throw off the burthen of the maintenance of their children, their full and entire maintenance in healthy conditions. Just, then, it is for those who care for them to help them to bear their burthen, not to take it from them. This is true kindness, and good alike for them and for society.

But to say, 'You can get your children's meals or maintenance from the rates' is to suggest what is altogether unkindly. It is as if so much money from the rates would set things straight. But it would not. It would not touch their real distress. It would deceive them. It would only give them some food for their children; but it would suggest to them that, if they are in want, there is Old Mother State at hand, who might be persuaded to say: 'Yes, I will feed your children; and, so far as I do so, you needn't.' But Old Mother State, if she is not beguiled and over-influenced, would say: 'Nay, I will care for you in many ways; but I should not help you as you ought to be helped, if I fed your children. They want bringing up at home—not dining out at school. I would, in many ways, willingly help you to bring them up at home. But my giving them dinners would only do harm—would interfere with your bringing them up properly, and would frustrate it. I leave dinners and the rest to voluntary charity. I am the State. Don't think you are going to turn me into a Monster Twentieth Century Dole; I should know better than to become that.'

So, if the State gave the meals or the maintenance, the rates would mount up, and the evil they were intended to meet would remain the same. The individual cause of distress would be overlooked. It would be plastered over with—food.

THE SECOND QUESTION.

Now what is the second question?

School meals, or rather meals for school children, may be of service in some cases, but at best they touch only a very minute part of the evil. What are the physical conditions of the children, and what is their bringing up at home?

We learn this, if in a poor stationary district in London we take points like these together—the height and weight of school children, their clothing, and cleanliness, and mental capacity, and their home conditions, such as over-

crowding, lack of mothering. Then the problem as a whole comes to light.*
So in the case of 405 boys:—

1. CLOTHING.

	Percentage
Scantiest possible	7.4
Insufficient to retain animal heat	34.8
Poor but passable	45.9
Well clad	11.8

2. CLEANLINESS.

Very dirty and verminous	11.0
Clothes and body dirty, but not verminous	34.7
Passably clean for boys	42.5
Clean, <i>above the average</i> for boys	12.0

3. MENTAL CAPACITY.

Very dull and backward	5
Below the average	17
Average intelligence	43
Above the average	24
Brilliant	10

4. OVERCROWDING.

The greater the overcrowding the worse the physique. Thus 16 boys living more than 4 to 5 in a room, with an average weight show .7 less than the normal height; those living more than 5 in a room showed an average deficiency in weight of 3.5 kilos, or 7.7 lbs., and in height of 7.6 cms., say nearly 3 inches.

But of boys living 1 to 2 in a room the weight was *plus* .5, the height was *plus* 1.5 above the average.

5. MOTHERING.

In 124 cases of boys conspicuously above the average in physique:—

The 'mother works' in 13 cases.

The mother keeps house in 109.

The mother is dead in 2.

In 110 boys conspicuously below the average:—

The 'mother works' in 57 cases.

The mother keeps house in 44.

The mother is dead in 9.

So we may put it:—

The well-clad boys weighed most.

The verminous boys weighed much less, and were much less tall than the average.

The boys below the average of intelligence did not show lack of height or weight.

But the boys above the average had also 'a decided advantage in physique'—weighed more and stood higher.

The boys living in overcrowded rooms weighed less and were smaller than others.

The boys whose mothers kept the house grew best, even though the father was a 'parasite member of the family.'

When mothers go out to work the added income of the family is not repaid by the increased physique of the children, who practically never get a properly prepared meal.

And we may add—the before-school age is the most important.

If mothers suckle their children, fewer die, many more grow to vigorous life.

So at St. Pancras* the infant death-rate during the summer quarter of 1905 fell 20 per thousand below that of London, and 22 per thousand below that of England and Wales. During the same quarter of 1906, as compared with the corresponding quarter of 1905, it fell again 32 per thousand below that of London, and 33 per thousand below that of England and Wales. During the warm dry summer of 1906 the infant mortality of England and Wales rose 12 per thousand, that of London 20 per thousand, whereas that of St. Pancras fell 12 per thousand. This result was obtained by no relief system, but by Women Inspectors and Women Voluntary Visitors persuading women to nurse their own children—one more argument for promoting good bringing up, and not State relief.

And again, as evidence that the more important period of young life is not the school-age, and the possible school-meal, period, 5 to 15, but that which precedes it, 0–5, it may be noted that in England and Wales the deaths in the first five years, 0–5, numbered 199,678, against 20,048 in the subsequent ten years 5–15.

Now, is it not clear that what is wanted is to think of these children not as school children who want meals, but as home-and-school children who want in all ways healthy *bringing up*?

* See Report of Dr. J. T. J. Sykes, Medical Officer of Health, on Infant Mortality Rates in South St. Pancras, October 18, 1906.

That is the real obligation that lies on us—to help the parents to bring up their children, to teach the children so that they may be good parents.

This is not a question of relief or money; it is a question of thought and education. That granted, relief or money may help for some special purpose; that not granted, relief or money will only hinder—will cover up the evil, not remedy it.

THE THIRD QUESTION.

So we come to the third question—the provision of meals for children out of the rates. But we find that it has been already dealt with!

For children who want meals there is money enough available to supply meals; or it may be easily obtained. For children who want ‘bringing up’ the State meals will not help. While for the destitute there is the provision made by the nation through its Poor Laws.

To put meals on the rates will increase the burthen of the rates without doing the good which would justify the expense. Especially is it wrong that the ratepayers, many of them poor themselves, should be called on to pay for others hardly more poor.

To the calculating ratepayer, if the school feeding become general and free, as some desire, the thing may seem a bargain. He may say, as already he has done: ‘I have four children at school. Their meals will save me four shillings a week. I occupy a house and pay the rates. If they put up the rates, I shall have to pay only a shilling or so more. So let the public pay, and let me save three shillings or so. I have the best of the bargain.’

This is well put. It shows what the rates may do: put a premium on selfishness, and help a man—*not* to do his duty, but to lower the whole standard of duty in family life.

On the other hand, there is a right course which entails no such cost and no such injury. It is to think of the children and their homes together, to co-operate with medical and other officers (including the Poor Law authorities, if need be), and to join hands to have the children properly brought up.

And where the parents so entirely fail of their duty as to make this impossible, to adopt the plan, which has been tried and worked well, of placing the children in Day Industrial Schools, where they can be well cared for in every way, and may yet, as far as it is right, keep touch of their parents.

These plans are shortly described in the second of the two resolutions following, adopted with hardly any dissent at a very large and representative meeting in October of this year.

The first resolution would prevent the harm done by State feeding. It is this :

1. That it is contrary to the interests, not only of the general community, but also of the parents of children and of the school children themselves, that school children at public elementary schools should be maintained by the State, as some ask, or that, as others demand, they should be provided with meals at the cost of the rates.

The second resolution suggests the alternative—the right course—to promote the proper *bringing-up* of children at home and at school. It is this :

2. That it is of great importance to the community, and to both parents and children :
 - (1) That Medical Officers should examine and supervise children at school from the point of view of health, sanitation, and cleanliness.
 - (2) That there should be a representative School Relief Committee for each School or group of Schools, acting in co-operation with the Medical Officers, Teachers, and Attendance Officers, and with Health Visitors and other voluntary agencies, who should make inquiries into the home circumstances of children who appear to require aid.
 - (4) That, wherever possible, with assistance to the children should be combined such assistance to the family as would lead to better home conditions.
 - (5) That any children who require meals should be selected by the School Relief Committee in conjunction with the Teachers and the Medical Officer.
 - (6) That where it is found necessary to provide meals they should be furnished from voluntary sources exclusively.
 - (7) That the number of Day Industrial Schools should be increased, or that Day Schools of a similar type should be established in districts where the 'circumstances of the population' make them desirable with a view to 'the proper training and control of the children.'

The question indeed is of far-reaching importance. It stands for a choice between a *positive* policy for helping children—before school-age and afterwards—through the family as far as possible, and with its aid ; and a *negative* policy of relieving the children apart from the family, and thus weakening at every step the family itself as an active and most useful factor in social life.

CHARITY ORGANISATION SOCIETY,
CENTRAL OFFICE, DENISON HOUSE,
VAUXHALL BRIDGE ROAD, LONDON, S.W.

November 1906.